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AUTHOR	Riley, Dawn Mahailia
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ABSTRACT

Three brief papers on literacy issues in Trinidad are presented. "Literacy for Women Project" reviews a 1990 workshop provided as part of International Literacy Year activities. It notes that the literacy rate among women in Trinidad and Tobago is approximately 90 percent but that the majority of illiterates overall are women. Literacy was defined as the ability to read and write in Standard English and to do mathematical calculations. "The Trinidadian Library System" argues that there are significant financial constraints in meeting the needs of the Trinidad and Tobago primary school system. Recommendations are made for improving the infrastructure and for encouraging child and parent participation. "Children and Literacy" discusses literacy issues confronting children in the West Indies as a whole, including the need for more resources and more indigenous literature appropriate for children. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

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REPORT:
LITERACY FOR WOMEN PROJECT
by
Dawn Mahailia Riley

The Network of Non-Governmental Organizations For The Advancement Of Women (NGO's) launched its International Literacy Year 1990 Literacy For Women Project at a Workshop held on 113/01/90

The Workshop began with Chairman of the ILY Sub-committee Mrs. Daphne Rousea giving an indication of the role of NGO's in the Trinidad and Tobago situation. Among which are:

(a) To educate and inform
(b) To provide useful communication between NGO's
(c) To develop strategies for the advancement of women
(d) To educate Government about the function of NGO's

The feature address was given by Dr. Helen Pyne-Timothy, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and General Studies.

In her address, Dr. Pyne-Timothy alluded to the fact that the literacy rate among women in Trinidad and Tobago is approximately 90% and that there is a considerably large number of newspapers in the country with high circulation figures. There is also a high maintained literacy level within the country.

Therefore, if Trinidad and Tobago has such a high literacy rate among women, why should the emphasis be placed on a literacy project for women? And, what are the goals of a literacy program for women?

Figures provided by the U.N. show that in 1985, the majority of adult illiterates were women. The rate being 34.9% as compared to 20.5% for men, out of a total estimated figure of 889 million adult illiterates in the world. In Trinidad and Tobago the same holds true -- the majority of adult illiterates are women. What do these figures portent for the Trinidad and Tobago situation?

However, one is forced to consider. Are the indicators of literacy levels accurate? Then, if our indicators are correct, then what is a definitive definition of literacy?

From the Workshop, my work group defined literacy as the ability to read and write in Standard English as well as the ability to do mathematical calculations. While the Trinidad and Tobago official definition states that a literate is a person who has had 6 years of primary schooling.

While many may disagree with the view that reading and writing should be done in Standard English, the fact is that the

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world is a global village. It writes and speaks Standard English. What we in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean need to do, is to develop our ability to switch from our indigenous dialects to Standard English with ease and vice versa.

If we are to follow the official definition of literacy, then what of those children who because of a learning disability, are unable to read and write? What of those who are disinclined to read and write, and therefore leave school without mastering these skills? How is our educational system equipped to handle these special needs?

What of those who leave school barely functionally literate? Are they to be considered illiterate?

What of the women in the market and parlors, the road vendors who are unable to read and write, yet they can calculate faster than you or I?

There are reasons for concern and emphasis, however. Among these are:

(a) Statistics show that illiteracy rates are higher among women than men.
(b) As a result of illiteracy, more women are becoming unable to fill slots in specialized job areas. This factor limits them economically.
(c) The rate of teenage pregnancies is growing rapidly in the country. For many teenage girls, an early pregnancy brings their formal education to an end.
(d) As these young women begin to care for their children, while unemployed or underemployed, through lack of usage their literacy skills deteriorate.
(e) In a society where the economic climate is deteriorating, it is the elder of the children or the non-achiever who, because of economic reasons is taken from school or invariably is chronically absent because she needs to care for younger siblings within the family.
(f) Mothers are the earliest educators of their children. If they are illiterate, how can they impart the knowledge that they themselves lack?

These mothers are often required to be single parents. They often have to check homework, sign forms, meet with teachers. How can they adequately function without the requisite knowledge?

Inevitably, the mother becomes frustrated at her inability to communicate. She is required to read instructions on bottles, fill out applications, relay messages... The list is mind-boggling.

On the economic level, women who are illiterate apart from being frustrated and without self-confidence are basically unemployable. This is the time when they are ripe for

exploitation by E.P.Z's and are virtually alienated from participating in national politics and undertaking leadership roles.

How then can we change the norm? As many of these women who are illiterate leave school, they join the ranks of the unemployed, programs to assist them, embarrass them. The cost of books are prohibitive (more so with the implementation of VAT) and essentially without being able to read, the facilities offered by our library services cannot be utilized.

Equipping a woman with literacy skills gives her a toe-hold on gaining control of her life (economic, social) as well as that of her family. Developing women's literacy skills empowers them and assists the development of future generations.

It is useful to remember that there is some good in a little bit of bad. Here in Trinidad and Tobago, our educational system has benefitted greatly from expansion within the last 20-25 years. Moreover, there is a diversity of educational offerings that is unsurpassed anywhere in the Caribbean. However, our problem lies with the fact that our methods of teaching should and must be re-tailored to suit and to cater to all types of learners which exist in the school system.

At the end of the Workshop, we isolated four possible projects which could be implemented during ILY. We also made a resolution that as part of our plan of action we should petition Government to remove VAT from ALL books.

I urge all members of CAFRA to support this resolution. We need to say an un-equivocal "no" to the payment of VAT on an essential commodity -- books; the windows of knowledge. Our children will thank us, but more importantly, in the long run, we will thank ourselves.

THE TRINIDADIAN LIBRARY SYSTEM - FINANCE, FRIEND OR FOE

(c) 1990
DAWN MAHAILIA RILEY

Our primary school library system in Trinidad and Tobago is soon to be given a financial shot in the arm via a 1.4 million dollar promise made by our Minister of Education.

While this seems so promising, there is some reason for concern. We literacy activists in Trinidad and Tobago face a considerable degree of financial constraints in obtaining the kind of support we desire for our children's educational well-being. As a consequence, to the uninvolved bystander, it would seem that any financial help we receive or are to receive should be welcomed with open arms. However, this grant should be looked at in a wider context. Would the money provided by the Grant be best spent on the development of our primary school library system when:

(1) Our children need as a priority, to be taught to read and write effectively.

(2) The quality of education in the primary school system is in need of improvement.

During 1990, some functional literacy programs have been planned, however these programs cannot be implemented in isolation without the proper infrastructure in place.

Among these are:

(1) Immediate filling of teacher vacancies throughout the whole educational system.

(2) Lowering of the pupil-teacher ratio in the primary school.

These issues are all paramount in importance to the provision of primary school libraries. It should be borne in mind that the development of our library systems would be useless unless our children are able to read and there is a teacher to teach them.

At present within our primary school system there is an on-going program which I believe is unique and interesting. Our metropolitan sister/brother activists could possibly consider its merit for implementation within their own schools.

In Trinidad and Tobago, we have primary schools which operate enjoyable, efficient school libraries where each student brings a book at the beginning of each school term. These books are circulated among his class mates. At the end of the term, the student can take his book back.

Via this system, he is able to borrow other books from his class mates while sharing his own with them.

The benefits of this system are:

(1) It encourages children to care for their books.

(2) It encourages collaborative reading.

(3) It develops class spirit.

With the initial 1.4 million to be injected into the provision of primary school libraries, one could reasonable expect that there would be recurrent replacement costs since many of the books provided will be ruined by vandalism.

Via the classroom library project, parents would play an active role by:

(1) Ensuring that their children read.

(2) Ensuring that donated library books are cared for properly.

(3) Supervising their children's reading.

(4) Developing their family life re having an active family reading period for all members of the family. Children should be encouraged to read by examples set by parents.

Children should be assisted in their attempts to develop dynamic reading skills and should develop a love for reading. It is imperative that they are taught how to read, how to enjoy what they have read, and moreover, how to digest and retain what they have read.

Some other creative sources of reading matter include clippings from magazines and newspapers. If possible, children could be encouraged to begin journals or scrap books of clippings to share interesting bits of reading matter with their class mates.

In the final analysis, the financial 1.4 million promised to our library system to develop primary school libraries could be spent more effectively in other avenues of our educational system and at less cost.

CHILDREN AND LITERACY - AN OVERVIEW

BY: Dawn Mahailia Riley
(c) 1990

My previous article dealt with the ILY 1990 "Literacy For Women Project." In this article and the other which complements it, I will attempt to deal with Literacy as it affects our children in Trinidad and Tobago.

In Trinidad and Tobago and the West Indies as a whole, where finance is concerned, we face a great deal of difficulty in convincing those who control the nation's purse strings that they should put their money where their mouth are, i.e. in improving the literacy skills of the nations' children and the provision of quality literature in healthy amounts.

There is a need for our West Indian children to be provided with books of quality and quantity. This need stems from the fact that so many of our West Indian writers choose to produce adult books in preference to children's fiction.

As a result of this, our children are constantly in need of adequate, culturally suitable fiction. To their detriment, they are fed large doses of North American literature, which is often alien to their day-to-day experiences.

Why this is so puzzling is simply because the children's literary market is and continues to be a lucrative one. There are several reasons for this. Among the reasons is the fact that there is a continuous market -- as one group of children grows up, there is another group of readers who are ready to take the former's place. Books over the years have continued to be one of the main gift choices made by relatives for children. If one is luck, one's book may become a school syllabus text.

Where are we then, to get the kinds of culturally suitable material our children in the West Indies need?

Hopefully, if our indigenous writers are made to understand the profitable economics of the juvenile market, maybe then, they would begin to produce more books.

However, there is need to be cognizant of the fact that, in the first instance, the results of attempts to encourage writers to produce more juvenile books may still be less than anticipated and, in the second instance, where time is concerned, fruitful results may not be readily obtained.

Moreover, writing for children is not as it would at first seem, easier than writing for the adult market. A writer of children's books has to have a "feel" for his craft. He has to know his material inside out, he has to know his market and is required to tailor his craft with precision and clarity and most

of all, creativity. In essence, it takes a special type of writer to write for children.

The importance of books to a child's life cannot be overemphasized. Books inspire and fire a child's imagination.

Unfortunately, here in Trinidad and Tobago, so many of our children leave school without mastering basic reading skills. Their lives are undoubtedly bereft, they are unable to fully appreciate the beauty of the written word.

Reading encourages a child's knowledge and experience. Experience, talent and discipline foster the development of creative writing skills. A child therefore because of his literary exposure begins to create his own fiction.

Children, if they are denied suitable reading material, are apt to relapse into illiteracy if they are not afforded the reading matter they need.

There is need for our children to be motivated to read in large doses not only during International Literacy Year. One possible plan of action could be:

(1) Encourage writers to produce appropriate reading material.

(2) Encourage interest among children -- parents, teachers play important roles.

(3) Motivate the learners -- ensure that their hours of effort realizes fruit. Ensure that there is a ray of hope at the end of their tunnel of struggle to be literate.

It is absolute time when we should, as parents, encourage our children to read and write. It would be a sad day when we realize that through our own neglect, a generation of children are unable to recollect an experience, describe a sunset, to re-create a moment. A sad loss indeed.

A CHILDHOOD LOST

(c) 1986
DAWN MAHAILIA RILEY

Tapping the source
Relates to dreams of thought
Archaic though it seems,
Quantum pace imagination, dreams
erase

My childhood robbed
The fount of imagination drawn
with cup unfilled

unfurled, unrealized sought, seeks
Unfound moves on
Another time
Another space
Maybe

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